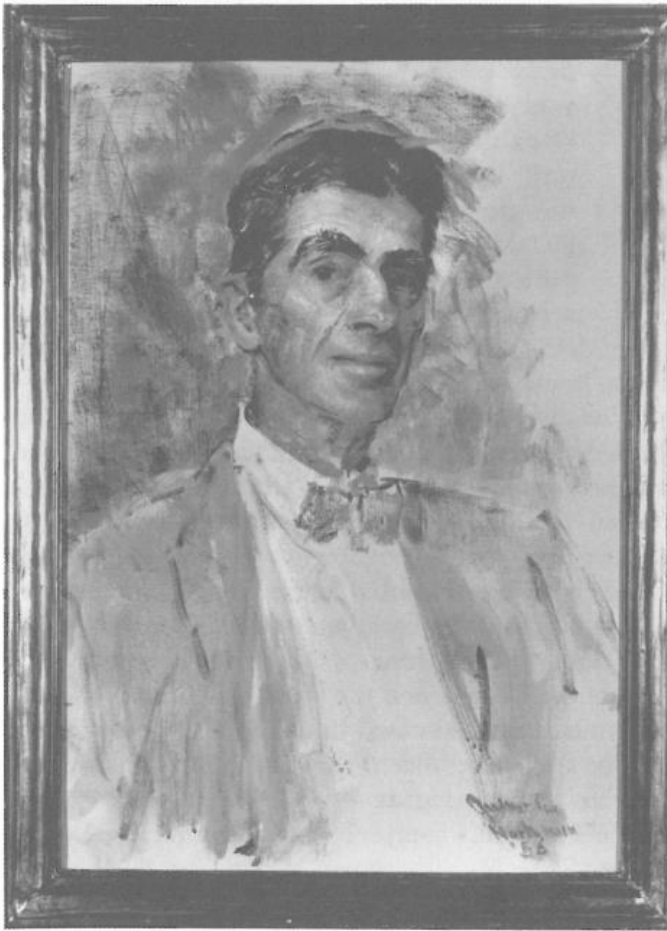


A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



Robert Wheelwright 1884-1965

Robert Wheelwright belongs to the generation of landscape architects who sought to define the philosophy and scope of the profession during the years before World War II. Wheelwright, a founder and editor of *Landscape Architecture* magazine from 1910 to 1920, helped to shape professional policy with respect to the role of the landscape architect in the private as well as the public domain. He founded the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1924 and taught there until

1941. Wheelwright's own practice ranged widely from the design of country estates and parks to Federal housing projects.

Wheelwright was born in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts on February 20, 1884. He graduated from Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania in 1902, received the A.B. from Harvard College in 1906 and the M.L.A. from Harvard University in 1908. After graduating Wheelwright worked briefly for the Philadelphia architect Wilson Eyre. In 1910 he entered the office of Charles Downing Lay, a landscape architect who was one of the founders of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899.¹

Wheelwright's association with Lay, whom he had known at Harvard, prompted him to found with Henry Hubbard, then an instructor at Harvard, the quarterly journal *Landscape Architecture*, the "Official Organ of the American Society of Landscape Architects." The first issue in 1910 carried Wheelwright's article against proposed modifications to Olmsted's Central Park, "The Attacks on Central Park," as well as a letter from Charles W. Eliot, President Emeritus of Harvard, offering the following definition of the newly founded profession:

The public needs to be taught that landscape architecture embraces city planning, the arrangement of formal courts, playgrounds, and gardens in compactly built cities, the decoration of highways and the utilization for humans of such broad open spaces as forests, water courses, cultivated fields and natural meadows provide. Every variety of decoration for house lots, sites of public buildings, station grounds and factory yards. Landscape architecture is primarily a fine art, and as such its most important function is to create and preserve beauty in the surroundings of human habitations and in the broader natural scenery of the country; but it is also concerned with promoting the comfort, convenience and health of urban populations which have scanty access to rural scenery and urgently need to have their hurrying, workaday lives refreshed and calmed by the beautiful and reposeful sights and sounds which nature, aided by the landscape art, can abundantly provide.

Wheelwright continued as editor of *Landscape Architecture* until 1920, although this work was interrupted in 1917 when he entered the service. During

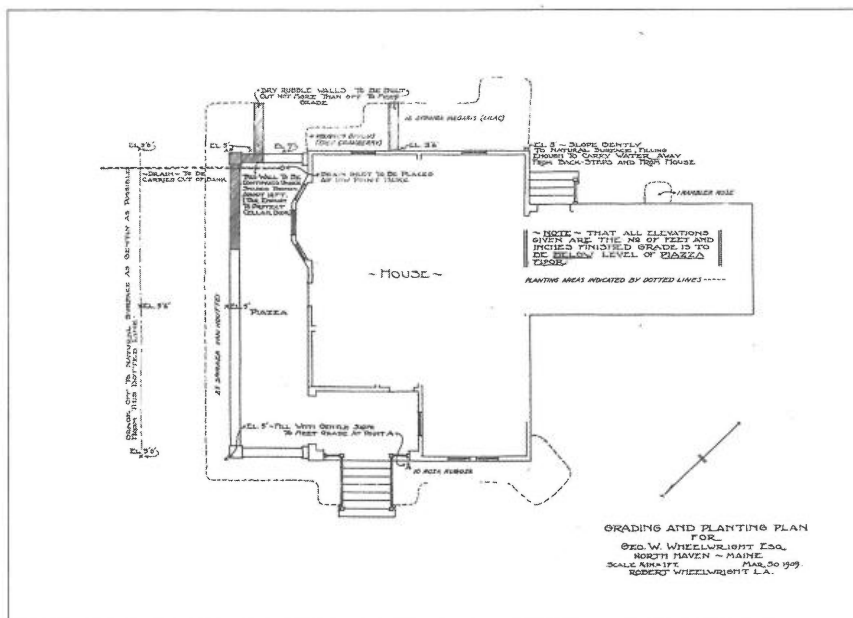


Figure 1. Planting plan for George W. Wheelwright, Jr.'s bungalow, Vinalhaven, 1909 (MHPC).

World War I he worked as a camp planner, laying out Camp Dodge in Des Moines, Iowa and Camp Merritt in Tenaflly, New Jersey. Discharged from the military on January 1, 1919, he practiced alone for a year in New York City and in Philadelphia from 1920 to 1923.

In 1926 Wheelwright founded the firm of Wheelwright & Stevenson in partnership with Markley Stevenson, with offices in Philadelphia. Wheelwright designed during the early thirties two well known private country estates near Wilmington, Goodstay and the Valley Garden. The former became Wheelwright's home after his marriage to Ellen Coleman DuPont Meeds in 1937. The 102 acre Valley Garden was bequeathed to the City of Wilmington in 1943 as a public park. Although Wheelwright's work was primarily private, he designed in the mid thirties a public housing project under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration at Wayne, Pennsylvania, which included extensive park and playground space. The firm also designed in 1937 Fort Christina Park, a memorial to the first Swedish immigrants in Wilmington on a two acre site overlooking the Christina River. After World War II Wheelwright designed St. Laurent Cemetery on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France.

Wheelwright maintained his principal office in Philadelphia, though as a long summer resident of the island of North Haven he often worked from an office there. He bought and later restored three houses in the village overlooking the Thoroughfare in the mid twenties.

Wheelwright's first known commission in Maine was a planting plan dated March 30, 1909, prepared for the bungalow associated with the summer cottage of George W. Wheelwright, Jr. on Vinalhaven (Figure 1).

Although much of the planting is overgrown, some native Viburnum, Spirea, and Lilacs remain.

Beginning in 1925, Wheelwright planned several gardens on the mainland. The first of these was the Colonial Revival style garden for Mrs. William J. Curtis at "Portlaw," her Camden summer home. The garden retains many of Wheelwright's original architectural features, including an arbor, some trellis work, and the outlines of original planting beds.

Also beginning in 1925, Wheelwright started work on one of two other gardens designed in the Colonial Revival style. This was the extensive garden designed for Donald D. Dodge of Philadelphia at Rockport. Wheelwright's comprehensive plan for the grounds of "Spite House," a handsome Federal residence which Dodge had transported from Phippsburg by barge to its present site on Beauchamp Point, responded in

every detail to the architectural richness and elegance of the house (Figure 2).

Wheelwright's design for the Dodge garden included clearly articulated, formal perennial beds and annual gardens, extensive greenhouses as well as less formal wooded areas situated beyond the house (Figure 3). Wheelwright was responsible for the design of carefully crafted fences, gates, granite steps, and retaining walls, based on earlier Colonial models. Two remarkable features of the garden are the charming summer house and the so called "Cocktilarium," a granite terrace situated to the east of the perennial garden with magnificent views of Penobscot Bay and the Fox Islands² (Figure 4).

Wheelwright's comprehensive plan for the Dodge garden, like his subsequent design for the historic Pierce House garden at West Baldwin restored in 1931 for William Curtis Pierce, reflects a thorough grasp of New England Colonial architecture and garden design (Figure 5). Wheelwright shared with Fiske Kimball and others who weathered the Depression years a firm belief in the authority of Colonial tradition as a rich visual resource for both architectural and garden design. In this sense Wheelwright may be thought of as a pioneer in the now re-emerging field of historic landscape restoration.

Robert Wheelwright, who died in Wilmington, Delaware, on November 2, 1965, is still affectionately remembered by those who knew him on North Haven as "Uncle Bob." He was a stern, although frequently witty and outspoken figure. Lincoln-esque in appearance, he often wore white trousers, a white hat, and a starched white collar. He was an ardent sailor and boatsman often seen in his twenty-six foot

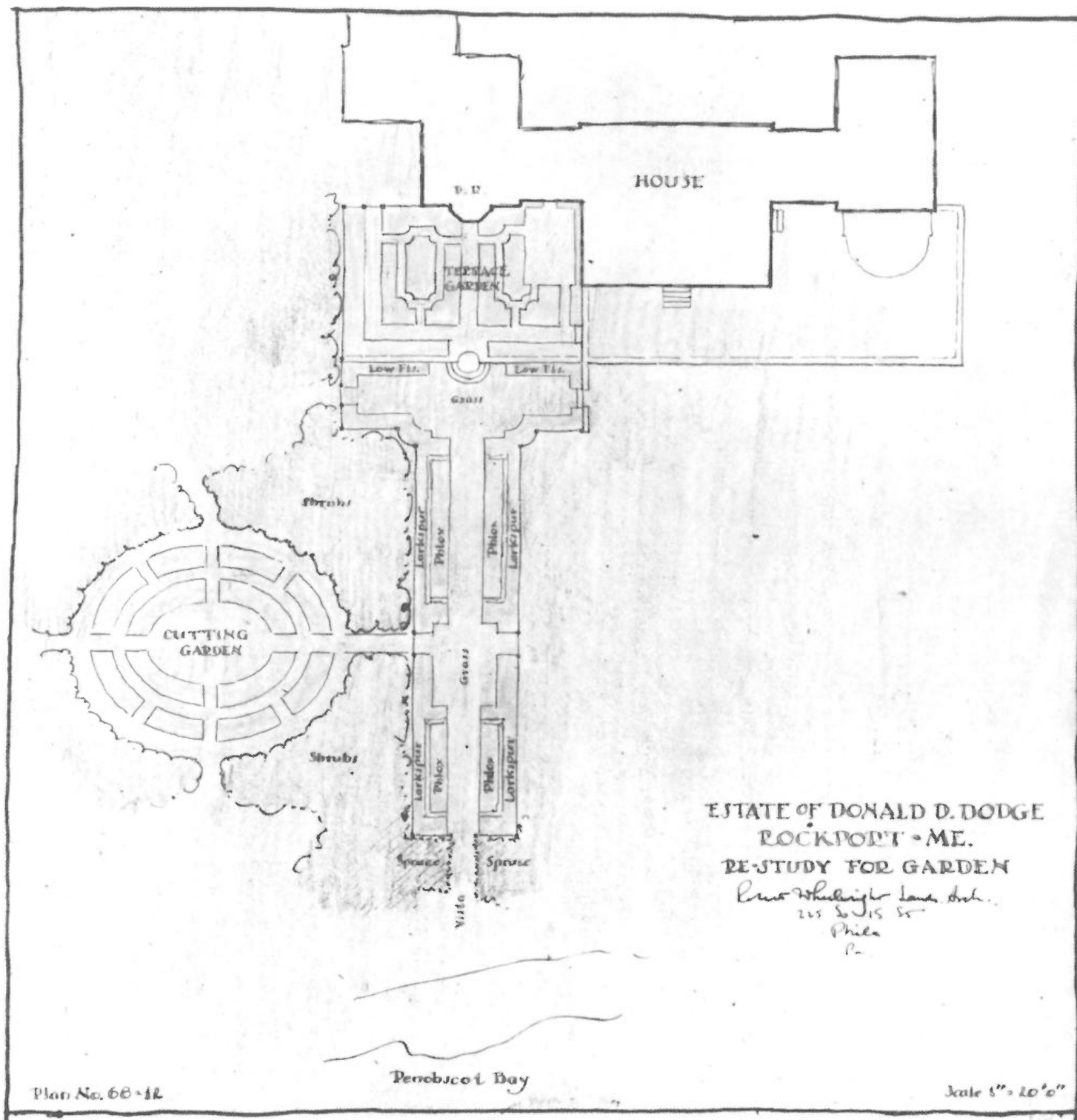


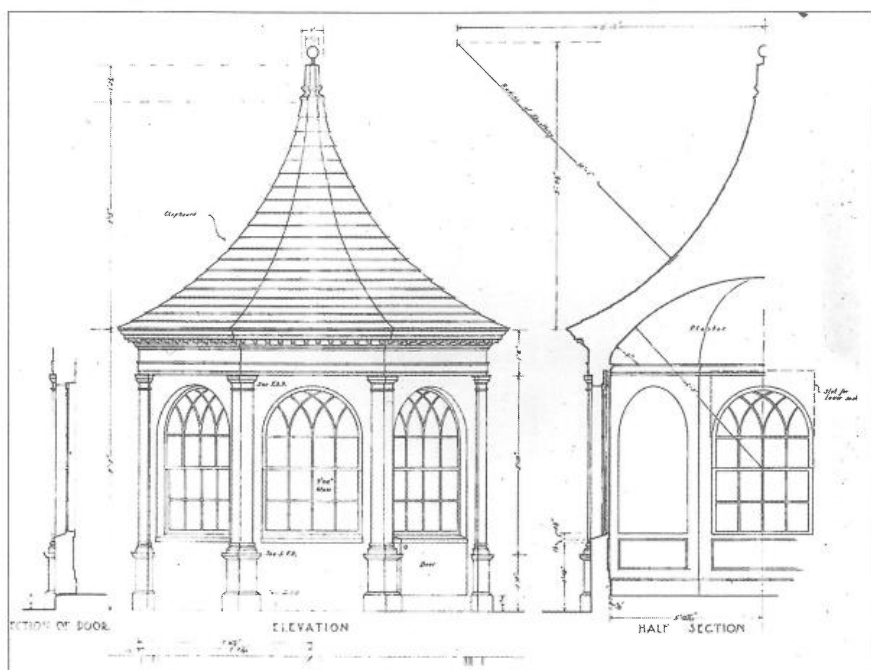
Figure 2. Garden Plan for "Spice House," Donald D. Dodge's summer home, Rockport, 1925 (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dodge).

wooden launch going off on a sketching expedition to one of the neighboring islands. A perennial garden associated with one of the houses he restored with his wife Ellen, who was herself a talented painter, has recently been revived by one of her daughters. A simple granite stone marks Wheelwright's grave overlooking Southern Harbor.³

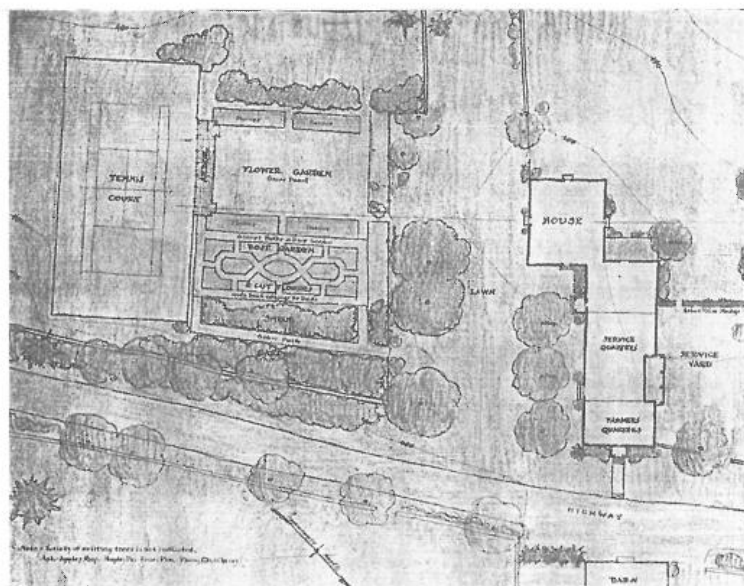
Eleanor M. McPeck

NOTES

1. Further biographical details may be found in the University of Pennsylvania Archives, Philadelphia.
2. Details concerning the Dodge garden at Rockport furnished courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dodge.
3. I am indebted to Mrs. Austin Lamont, daughter of Wheelwright's first wife Attaresta Barclay Moon (d. 1933) for furnishing valuable details of her stepfather's life at North Haven.



Above: Figure 3. Garden and grounds of "Spite House," Dodge Summer Home, Rockport, circa 1930 view (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dodge).
 Left: Figure 4. Drawing for the summer house at "Spite House," Dodge Summer Home, Rockport, 1925 (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dodge).
 Below left: Figure 5. Grounds and garden plan for the William Curtis Pierce House, West Baldwin, 1931 (MHPC).



KNOWN COMMISSIONS IN MAINE BY ROBERT WHEELWRIGHT

George W. Wheelwright, Jr. Bungalow, Vinalhaven, 1909,
 planting plan
 "Portlaw," Mrs. William J. Curtis Cottage, Camden, 1925,
 garden
 "Spite House," Donald D. Dodge Summer Home,
 Rockport, 1925, grounds and garden
 William Curtis Pierce House, West Baldwin, 1931,
 grounds and garden

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